



Weymouth Firefighters

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Press Release

Weymouth Firefighters and Partners Launch Program to Help Families Cope with Opiate Addiction

Weymouth, MA – September 23, 2014 – The Weymouth firefighters have assembled a team of community organizations to help Weymouth families cope with the growing opiate-addiction epidemic in the Commonwealth. The Weymouth Family Addiction Support Team, or FAST for short, represents a community partnership dedicated to connecting residents with the resources and support services they need to battle opiate use by family members and loved ones. On Friday, September 26, the team will unveil a website as well as a confidential helpline to provide guidance to those families who don't know where to turn.

Like many South Shore communities, Weymouth faces an acute challenge from the overuse of oxycodone and other narcotic painkillers, often as a route to heroin addiction. In 2009, the town's rate of non-fatal opiate related hospitalizations, emergency visits and observation stays was nearly double the state average.

Since March 2013, Weymouth firefighters have participated in the state's pilot program to carry and administer the lifesaving medication, naloxone – better known by its brand name, Narcan. Weymouth firefighters have saved, on average, more than one person a week from a fatal drug overdose by administering Narcan. This is a total of 99 overdose reversals in 18 months, not counting those performed by private ambulances in the town.

While dealing with emergency responses to overdoses, Weymouth firefighters realized that more had to be done to help families cope with the challenges of opiate addiction. "There are a lot of families out there suffering with this behind closed doors," says Brad Flannery, a Weymouth firefighter, paramedic and Local 1616's Narcan Committee Chairmen. "We show up when there's a medical emergency; they get treated, and once they're released, there's no follow up." Now Weymouth firefighters seek to build what has been missing in the community: a support net for families touched by the addiction epidemic.

"There are many resources out there to help families deal with opiate addiction," says Flannery. "But for most people, it's an untraveled road and very difficult to navigate. We want to give them an easy way to find local help and support."

With a startup grant from the South Shore Hospital's Community Benefits Program, the Weymouth firefighters will launch the FAST program in partnership with the Weymouth Health Department, Manet Community Health Center, South Bay Mental Health, and a proposed local chapter of the family support group organization, Learn to Cope. In collection, the partners offer a comprehensive set of addiction support services that are close to home and largely free of charge to Weymouth residents.

Lyn Frano, coordinator of the town's Substance Abuse Prevention Team and federal Drug-Free Communities Grant, hopes that FAST will become a model for other communities as they look for new ways to deal with the unique public health crisis posed by opiate addiction. "A lot of times, families feel embarrassed, feel ashamed, and don't reach out for help," says Frano. "This makes it very difficult for cities and towns and even community-based organizations to respond to the opiate problem. With FAST, we hope to reach further, connect with more families, and show people that their community is here to help."

FAST is already receiving resounding support from Weymouth's elected officials and town leaders. "Opiate addiction is a terrible struggle afflicting not just Weymouth families but those in communities across the Commonwealth," explains Weymouth's Mayor, Susan Kay. "For years, our Town has been proactive in stemming the problem, and once again our firefighters and health officials are doing something new and innovative to help residents. I am very proud of the work already done by FAST, and I believe that their new website and helpline will become vital sources of assistance for many families in Weymouth."

"FAST is going to make a big difference in people's lives," says Weymouth's Fire Chief, Keith Stark. "The team will be a lifeline for families who need one most, and thanks to the efforts of Brad Flannery, our community partners, and [Firefighters' Union] Local 1616's past president, Richard Ramponi, people won't have to feel alone as they navigate the difficult road to recovery."

The FAST website and confidential helpline will be activated on Friday, September 26, following a 1:30 pm launch event at Weymouth's Town Hall Council Chambers. Weymouth residents are encouraged to contact the team for guidance and support at www.weymouthaddictionhelp.org once the site is activated.

